

**The Little Hoover Commission
Testimony and Background on California Department of Social
Services' Juvenile Crime Prevention Efforts
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Thank you for the opportunity to address the members of the Little Hoover Commission as you consider the issue of juvenile crime and violence prevention in our communities and State.

I am going to discuss two groups of children today: the abused and neglected children in our Child Welfare System and the juvenile offenders in our Juvenile Justice system. For the sake of brevity and to provide contrast, I am going to treat each group as though clear distinctions and generalizations can be made between them. In many cases this is easy to do. In other cases the complexities of real life make it difficult to hold to clear distinctions.

There are approximately 6.9 million children and youth in California between the ages of birth and nineteen. It is a primary job of the California Department of Social Services, in partnership with the county welfare

departments the juvenile courts, and probation departments to assure that these children grow up in secure families free from abuse and neglect.

Sadly, over three hundred thousand of these children come to the attention of child welfare services each year, reported to be mistreated by their parents and caregivers. And a majority of these cases are substantiated. A complex system of services exists to protect these children, provide for their well being and to rehabilitate their families. This involves the work both of state and local child welfare, child abuse prevention, licensing, foster care adoptions programs, and sometimes our welfare to work program - CalWorks

These children enter the “primary door” to our services. They become known to us not because of illegal behavior but because of the harm done to them by their families. Many of these children cannot remain at home safely. When this is the case they must reside in our Out of Home Care system away from their families. They are placed either in the care of relatives or of foster care providers, both foster families and institutions. Services are then brought to bear to reunite the children with their families

when that can be done safely. There are approximately 96,345 such children in California.

There is also a “secondary door.” This is the door that opens from the juvenile justice system. This door involves our partnership with local Probation Departments.

On any given day there are roughly 55,000 children and youth in the California juvenile justice system. Of these, approximately 6,900 are being cared for in the State’s out of home care system licensed by the California Department of Social Services. These children become known to us because they are juvenile offenders requiring placement. They have been adjudicated in court and placed in residential programs not requiring secure detention. The vast majority of these 6,900 children and youth are in Group Home placements where staff can provide around the clock supervision, care and activities aimed at changing the child’s way of behaving and thinking. The primary mission of these placements is rehabilitation of the juvenile.

These two groups of children sound quite different from one another, Victims vs. Juvenile Offenders. And, in fact, there are sometimes significant differences between the two groups. Beyond the issues of abuse and neglect vs. offenses, the Child Welfare population is skewed to the younger age groups while the Juvenile Justice population tends to be teen age. However, the two groups share the same roots. Disproportionately they come from splintered families, malfunctioning communities and backgrounds of parental illness, mental illness and substance abuse. For the most part, they have been abused or neglected by their parents.

In (Reducing Crime In America—National Crime and Delinquency Policy statement 1997) states that “criminal justice reforms, alone, cannot be expected to reduce crime. Other societal concerns, including inadequate health care, school failure, child abuse and neglect, and unemployment, have been shown to be important risk factors for criminal behavior.” Or as Father Boyle, from Homeboy Industries is inclined to say, “Nothing stops a bullet like a job.”

In fact, many argue that the only significant difference between the two groups is when they first come to public attention. Either they come to us when they are young and living in an abusive or neglectful family or later when they have committed crimes.

This generalization like any other is flawed, but it is beyond dispute that when we treat child abuse and neglect effectively and early we are preventing later juvenile crime and violence. Today's abused and neglected child provides the makings of tomorrow's juvenile offender.

By the year 2008, there will be about 4.9 million adolescents in California. This group will comprise almost 13% percent of California's population. It is the group we must begin to focus on now. Our efforts to prevent and treat child abuse and neglect, to support families, to improve our schools and develop our communities will pay off both for these children and for our State.

In order to take this stand to prevent juvenile crime and violence, we must work together at the State and local levels, within and across lines of

programs and organizations to coordinate our efforts so that funding sources, human resources and community commitment can be harnessed to meet this challenge.

An example of an effective cross-agency collaboration at the local level is described in a recent Sacramento Bee article entitled “Outreach workers aim to get kids in school” (August 21, 2000). Outreach workers employed by the Sacramento City Unified School District work together with Sacramento City Police Department conducting home visits to track down kids with high truancy rates to find out why they are not attending school. Often times these home visits unveil serious abuse and neglect problems that result in a student’s chronic absence from school. Police work closely with schools in tracking down truants because statistics reveal that high truancy rates go hand-in-hand with high crime rates. According to Sacramento City Police Det. Vonda Walker, “When kids aren’t in school, the burglary rates go up.”

We need to be soft hearted but hard headed in dealing with our children. Children need to be protected, loved and watched over by their families

and by communities. They also need to be held to high expectations. We must also expect good examples and high standards of behavior from our California's families, schools, institutions and communities. We can neither make nor accept excuses for inattention, preoccupation, or loss of focus and priority when our children's future is at stake. Nor can we wash our hands of our obligation to assist families that have lost their way.

As we address the needs of our children today we become a better society both today and tomorrow.

I have included in written testimony descriptions of programs administered by the California Department of Social Services designed to prevent and treat child abuse and neglect, to promote child and community well being and to reduce juvenile crime and violence. Each of these programs does its protective good today but also holds promise of preventing later criminal behavior in the lives of our children.